



Grove Wellbeing Centre

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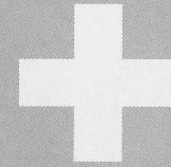
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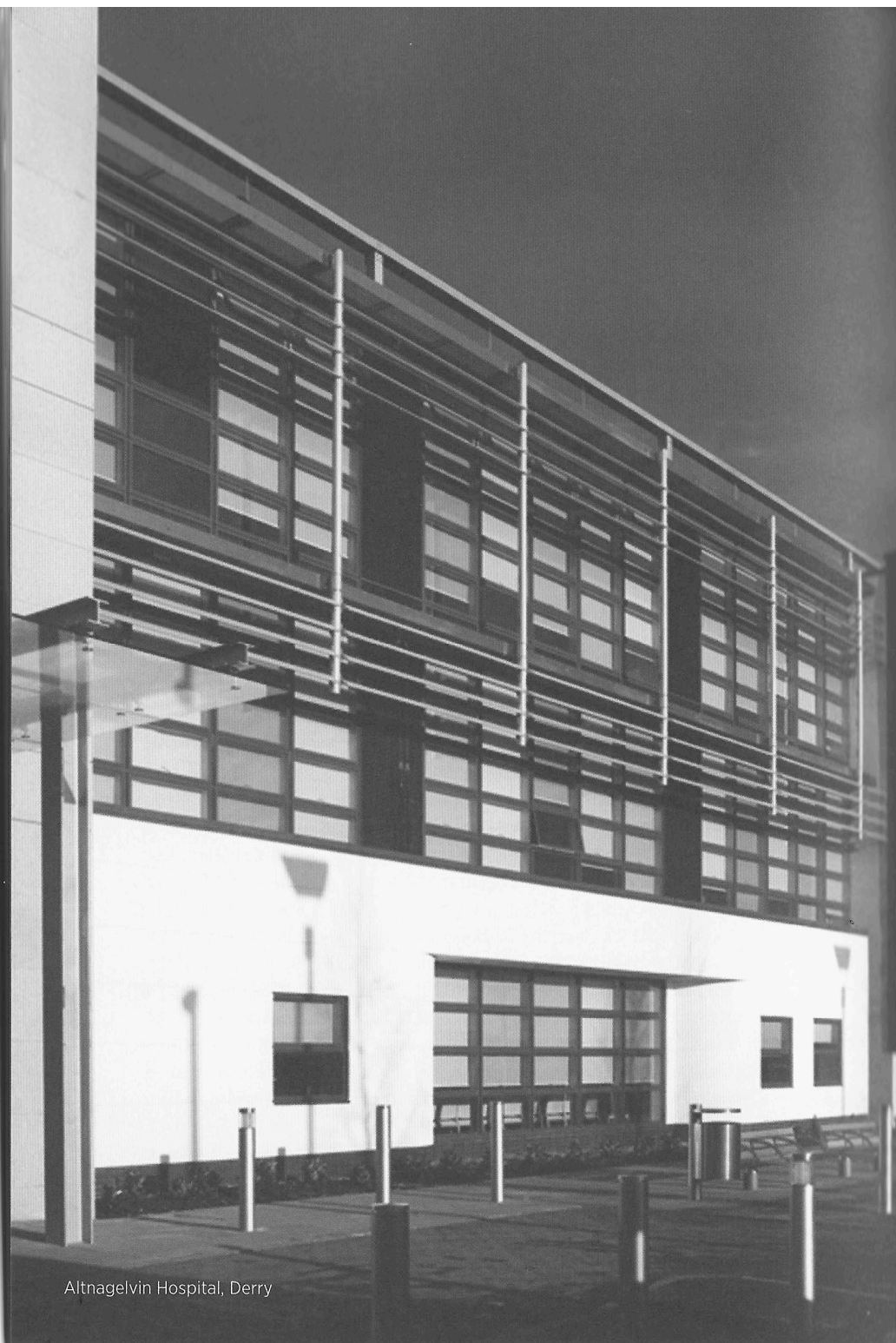
place
HEALTHCARE



Bayview Day Centre, Bangor

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Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry



Grove Wellbeing Centre, Belfast



Grove Wellbeing Centre

Belfast's Grove Wellbeing Centre, completed in 2008, is an innovative example of Northern Ireland's approach to delivering integrated local health and social care services. By combining a unique range of services with quality architecture, landscape and art, the £18million, 10000 sqm facility also represents significant government investment in better design as a more essential part of community infrastructure projects.^{2,3}

The Grove demonstrates how government and public health bodies recognise that improved health and economic benefits derive from better patient environments, as well as wider local access to earlier diagnosis and preventative therapies.² Located along the Shore Road and York Road area in the North of city the new centre is a distinctive addition to new community treatment and care centres completed in Belfast since 2002. It brings together three existing services provided by separate local public bodies: health and social care from The Belfast Trust, major leisure and swimming provision from Belfast City Council, and a public library from the Belfast Education & Library Board.

The ambitious project was made possible by additional funding assistance from Northern Ireland's Department of Social Development. As such it offers a prototype of integrated public investment and management models in Northern Ireland. According to the Northern Ireland government's vision for health care development, the project exemplifies a design response developed for a 'clearly articulated model of care' and identified need.² The three local public bodies involved agreed to act as joint clients for the new facility; maintaining independent operations

but benefiting from shared construction and running costs, more overall visitors and an ability to deliver improved public services to the Shore Road community.

The Wellbeing design team led by Kennedy FitzGerald Architects of Belfast, in association with Avanti Architects of London, had to grapple with the diverse needs and accessibility requirements for all three clients. The final project brief includes the following services:

Health: Primary Community Health Centre with dedicated public waiting areas; 11 GP suites, dentistry and podiatry clinics, occupational therapy and physiotherapy facilities, child development and a day centre for the elderly.

Leisure: Full-sized multi-use sports hall, 25-metre swimming and toddlers' pools, changing areas, a fitness suite, a bowling alley, and soft play.

Library: Public general books and music lending, information and IT resources.

Shared: Crèche, community and activity rooms, offices and support/ service areas, entrance and primary circulation, a franchised pharmacy and retail café.

The architectural response to the brief had to address considerable scale and volume differences between the smaller private health suites, the more flexible yet important library reading room, and the much larger volumes of the sports hall, swimming pool and associated plant equipment. The Centre's new-build location in a steeply sloping area of available parkland, The Grove Park, presented challenges of its own and was selected only after several feasibility studies for re-using existing facilities nearby were discounted. The resulting purpose-built Centre carves into the site's contours and aligns with York Road.

A responsive angular plan and carefully coordinated internal section take advantage of sharp level changes from the street up to

the park to incorporate all the building functions in three floors of accommodation. The floors appear as different horizontal strata, with the larger leisure component kept to the cooler north side and three narrow fingers of community healthcare, social care and GP services to the south. Landscaped courts cut through the building at several intervals, which allow continuous visual connections from York Road to the park beyond through extensively glazed double and triple-height internal areas. The library, contained within a long single-storey mirrored stainless steel feature, protrudes at first-floor level along the eastern York Road elevation. This contrasting form visually links the leisure and health parts of the building while providing a sheltered recess for the main street-level entrance.

Throughout the building, internal public spaces – at once functional, environmentally responsive, and spatially generous – use natural light and well thought-out colour schemes to create a bright, legible layout radiating from a triple-height central lobby at the York/Shore Road entrance. A second, equally prominent entrance from the first floor car-park level shares this central triple height area. From different levels, each of the Centre's three client areas overlooks the stepped void. The resulting diagonal views across this space aid visitor orientation and overall security while a prominently located feature stair encourages more direct access between levels instead of the lifts, which are grouped to one side. At street level, the retail pharmacy and open seating of the café off the lobby add public activity and allow views to the pool area and to/from the street.

The building design also employs a clever use of section to help conceal the bulk of the sports hall and pools, while the healthcare facilities stack up over three shorter stories and most of the mechanical spaces, with access to the pool undercroft, are located below ground. As the connecting element along the street, the library's simple long rectangular plan is enlivened with a sloped cross-section which rises upward toward a higher ceiling level at the York Road side. This increased height not only allows in more natural day lighting to the library's readings space, it also enhances the library's public presence from the street.

The healthcare side -by its nature- requires a more cellular design layout for consultant rooms in each of three narrow wings, but here as well the aspect and a wide central public circulation corridor enlivens the robust interiors, as does the variety of window patterns in more private rooms. Bright double-height public waiting areas between the wings overlook the external courtyards, each landscaped with a different theme. Accommodation for staff is equally pleasant and secure at upper levels, where circulation shares the tall public voids and daylight. Offices benefit from natural ventilation and carefully placed windows and terraces at upper level areas frame more expansive vistas eastward over Belfast Lough.

Over most of the building a sedum roof rises and falls with the section and slope of the park beyond. The roof helps unify the level changes and adds visual continuity from the upper park levels, where it is visible. As an additional amenity, it most successfully helps weave the building form into the sloping site from the park aspect. The remaining elevations layer from dark brown vertical panels that follow the roofline, to a middle section of chameleon-like muted orange to deeper rust coloured panels, to a tougher chalk-coloured render with storey-height stainless steel mesh panels at street level. In addition to the library, a number smaller mirrored stainless steel bays punctuate corners and key aspects of the building, reflecting shifting views of the surrounding context throughout each day. At night the street-level mesh panels, which can appear defensive in daylight, receive much-needed relief and illumination from integrated LED lighting.

Like the Grove's clients, the building's extensive technology, service and environmental systems are also well integrated and interdependent. The steel roof and clerestory glazing in the tall internal voids help refine the view out but also provide sensor-controlled smoke and natural ventilation to reduce the centre's need for mechanical services. Other carefully coordinated elements include high-specification responsive lighting and quick acting radiant panels, rainwater harvesting from the sedum roof which supplies the pool, and a combined heating and power (CHP) system. There is a noticeable attention to the choice of materials

and construction details inside and out. This attention clearly respond to the building's mixed urban and parkland setting, and reflects a whole-life quality-cost balance to the project rather than short term lowest building cost priority alone. Overall, the building scale and rigour of its design relate to the area's larger Victorian-era buildings as an appropriate and optimistic gesture for the potential of future local growth.

Since it was officially opened in 2008, The Grove has met many of the project aspirations to flexibly respond to local and strategic needs. The health care centre's combination with leisure and library services offers benefits of using the pool and exercise areas to support hydrotherapy and physiotherapy. Even the courtyards have been designed to double as part of occupational therapy, and the library is a public resource to access information on illnesses, social services, employment, housing and financial or educational issues.² The Grove has achieved national recognition within the UK as a successful example of inter-agency collaboration and accessible quality design; winning the 2008 Best Community Healthcare Building Award and the William Keown Trust Prestige Access Award.^{1,2}

Increasingly, the Centre's cross-community usage and evidence of improved links between the library, healthcare and leisure in their 'one-stop-shop' setting continue to benefit the public sector and local community as part of the long-term strategy for health, social care and a better quality built environment in Northern Ireland. For Belfast's targeted regeneration efforts and Northern Ireland's Health Care planning, the Grove Wellbeing Centre's holistic approach should continue to positively influence future health building designs, and act as a model for much-needed wider collaboration within Northern Ireland's public and private sectors.

Saul Golden

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Saul Golden is an architect with ten years healthcare experience across Northern Ireland. He is currently a Lecturer in Architecture at the University of Ulster School of Architecture and Design Belfast. This article has been partially adapted from a previous version by the author, published as 'In Rude Health', *Perspective*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2009, pp.44-51.